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## **EAP AND SUBJECT SPECIALIST ACADEMIC WRITING FEEDBACK COLLABORATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Feedback in the context of EAP continues to generate considerable interest, particularly given the growth in online distance learning provision for students. It gives teachers the opportunity to focus on individual students needs and is widely viewed as being essential to developing students' academic writing ability in a way that the F2F classroom simply cannot afford. As Hyland (2013b, p.180) notes, '(f)eedback offers the writer an outsider's view of a text and so provides a sense of audience and what the audience values in writing, contributing to his or her acquisition of disciplinary subject matter and patterns of argument and evidence'. Hyland's comment pertains, in fact, to feedback from subject specialists rather than EAP teachers. The latter are often regarded as outsiders in this process, whose role is to focus on the apparently less central issues of language and error correction rather than what could loosely be termed 'content'. However, separating language from content potentially creates a false dichotomy, the hierarchized nature of which Turner (2004, p.104) viewed as being 'at the root of many of the problems in EAP'.

This paper builds on our earlier grounded-theory research into effective feedback in the context of a collaborative online postgraduate academic writing course model, which has been adapted for use in different subject areas and disciplines and involves the provision of extensive written feedback by both EAP and subject specialists (see Northcott et al 2015 & 2016). The research has revealed that student expectations for the type of feedback provided by the different groups of tutors is not clearly demarcated. There is an assumption that EAP teachers will provide feedback on content as well as language. Is this something which can be realistically expected from EAP teachers? Should and to what extent are EAP teachers able to engage with content? Our comparison of EAP teacher and subject specialist feedback on content reveals similarities and differences in both the type and quality of feedback provided by members of the different communities of practice represented and suggests possible ways of meeting student expectations for content as well as language-focused feedback. It also highlights the benefits for both students and practitioners of collaboration between EAP teachers and subject specialists.

### **ELE TUTOR APPROACHES TO CONTENT FEEDBACK.**

Eleven ELE (English Language Education, University of Edinburgh) feedback tutors involved with the online courses were asked what they understood by 'content' and to what extent they were willing to provide feedback specifically on it. They were asked four questions:

1. What do you understand by 'content' as opposed to 'language' and 'structure'?
2. Where do you see the boundaries (if any) between 'content', 'language' and 'structure'?

3. Which of those three aspects do you put emphasis on giving feedback on?
4. Are you comfortable giving feedback specifically on 'content'? Why/Why not? What, if anything, does it depend on?

The feedback these tutors provided for their students was also examined to see whether their responses to the questions reflected their practice.

Before discussing their responses, it is useful to briefly look at some of the relevant literature. There are differing views as to the relationship between 'content' and 'language' which can inform teachers' approaches to feedback. Are they separate entities that can, as a consequence, be independently commented on or are they in fact inseparable? Tudor (1997, cited in Basturkmen 2010, p.8) offers a narrow end, very much ESP interpretation, defining content as 'domains of knowledge which the average educated native speaker could not reasonably be expected to be familiar with.' The language used to express that content is not seen as an intrinsic part. EAP tutors with an ESP background may stay clear of commenting directly on content as their experience might suggest this is not their area of competence. However, Hyland (2013a, p.245), for instance, asserts that 'content' is 'understood as the concepts, procedures, theories and understandings of a discipline' and that form is 'the rhetorical presentation of these in ways that will impress insiders'. Here, he clearly links the two, with language encompassing both.

Having considered two differing views of content, we can now look at each question in turn and focus on the sample responses from some of the writing tutors (WT). These have been selected to reflect the extreme ends of the views we encountered.

**1. *What do you understand by 'content' as opposed to 'language' and 'structure'?***

- The subject matter; ideas which are related to the topic as opposed to the language used to talk about them and the way they are organised. (WT-1)
- Content is engagement with the topic, such as citing, evidence, supporting points, argumentation and rebuttal of counterarguments. (WT-3)

WT-1 has a narrower interpretation. The one can be commented on to the exclusion of the other. WT-3 adopts a wider view that is more closely aligned to Hyland (2013a).

**2. *Where do you see the boundaries (if any) between 'content', 'language' and 'structure'?***

- Language and structure could be 'general academic', ie applicable in any field, whereas content is subject-specific. (WT-1)
- Argument logic and coherence falls under content and underlying structure. Language is the cohesive packaging of meaning, which falls under surface structure. (WT-3)

WT-1 does not view language and structure as genre-specific in the way Hyland does, and again WT-3 is much more closely aligned with Hyland, although Hyland would not include argument, logic and coherence in the 'content' category.

**3. *Which of those three aspects do you put emphasis on giving feedback on?***

- Language (when it is general academic, not subject-specific) and structure. (WT-1)

- I have tended to feel that my role was to focus on language and structure first. In a situation where I had experience of the subject area, I could perhaps advise in terms of content, certainly in terms of source choice, and the need to bring sources and ideas into dialogue - how to make choices about and manage content, perhaps. (WT-4)

Again, a divergence here. WT-1 will not comment on 'subject-specific language', which encompasses largely technical vocabulary and phrasing. WT-4 has a set of priorities but is clearly willing to 'step in' and comment on content but caveats this with 'experience of the subject area'.

**4. *Are you comfortable giving feedback specifically on 'content'? Why/Why not? What, if anything, does it depend on?***

- It depends very much on the subject, but in general, only in as much as the content does not deal with the question/title. If poorly written, it is obvious that some other content would improve the essay - e.g. examples, data to support a point; evidence of reading. (WT-2)
- It depends on how much knowledge I have of the subject in question. However, one of my methods of feedback on content is to ask questions. If ... a counterpoint occurs to me, for example, I wouldn't shy away from asking a simple question about this... 'Could you mention X here?'. I might be wrong - I have to trust that the student is in control of their own content - but at least I've put the thought in the student's mind, and opened a dialogue with them in feedback... I'm not afraid to provide this sort of conversation-starting feedback, even if the topic is far out of my comfort zone. I'm the audience at that moment, after all, and it's my duty to at least investigate why something feels incomplete or ambiguous, where possible. (WT-4)

WT-2 will comment on any evident irrelevance and disparity of content but restricts engagement to the surface level. WT-4 is willing to engage to a fair extent with content in the role of current audience and adopts a pragmatic strategy of questioning. Both see a limit to their 'competence' to comment on specialist content in the narrower sense that Tudor posits.

The writing tutors' view of language, structure and content and their roles regarding providing feedback on these accurately reflect their actual practice as revealed by the data (the actual instances of feedback). Writing tutors 2 & 1 were arguably more wary of commenting on specialist content, while writing tutors 3 & 4 were much more willing to engage with and comment on it.

## **DISCIPLINE SPECIALIST AND WRITING TUTOR FEEDBACK CROSSOVER**

Our findings so far suggest that language teachers can engage with content as well as language. It is clear that subject specialists also engage with language, in addition to content, when it suddenly becomes 'visible' (see Turner 2004 regarding her point that language is, in effect, invisible until something goes wrong).

There appears to be an element of 'crossover'. As Ingle (2016, p.158) notes, 'the artificial separation between language and content often becomes blurred and disappears. This

blurring reflects the ways that writing and knowledge are not distinct from the meaning and knowledge being represented'. However, besides revealing areas of blurring or crossover, the findings also indicate areas where feedback may be better provided by either the discipline specialist or the writing tutor. We revisited and analysed the data which consisted of written feedback provided by:

- writing tutors on draft sections of essays produced by PG students in Social and Political Sciences (SPS) and Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine (SAW)
- discipline specialists on the final drafts of these essays.

To categorise the data, we used discipline specialist marking criteria, which were adapted for use by subject specialists from the University of Edinburgh's Common Marking Scheme.

1. Critical/conceptual analysis
2. Strength/cohesion of argument
3. Use of sources/evidence
4. Structure and organisation
5. Breadth and relevance of reading
6. Clarity of expression, presentation and referencing

In the tables below, we focus on example feedback from four areas (categories), based on our original coding of the writing tutor feedback (see Northcott et al, 2015 & 2016). The areas where Writing Tutor and Discipline Specialist feedback coincide are given in italics. Where Discipline Specialists go further is underlined italics.

**Table 1:** Critical/conceptual analysis – No crossover

<b>ELE tutor feedback</b>	<b>Discipline specialist feedback</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i><u>Orford's narrative lense would have added some analytical depth</u></i></li> <li>• <i><u>See comments on the example of P which could be further developed and discussed in terms of X and Y for example</u></i></li> <li>• <i><u>Grasps some of the nuances of the notion of human rights</u></i></li> <li>• <i><u>Making the links between class and democracy more sophisticated</u></i></li> </ul>

This was the category in the discipline specialist feedback where we found no examples of crossover for content feedback.

**Table 2:** Use of sources/evidence and Breadth and relevance of reading

<b>ELE tutor feedback</b>	<b>Discipline specialist feedback</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Would you like to include some examples here to support your claim?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Arguments are often too vague; lack elaboration, explanation and examples</i></li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Could you give me one or two concrete examples?</i></li> <li>• <i>You have evaluated your sources but in places it is not entirely clear how they fit in with your argument</i></li> <li>• <i>This is more a summary of the literature and stating which sources agree/disagree. You need to express your thoughts on the literature.</i></li> <li>• <i>You need to link your evaluation of academic sources to the point you wish to make.</i></li> <li>• <i>You have integrated your sources and engaged with their views in a way that demonstrates your understanding of the issues involved.</i></li> <li>• <i>This is very good – you are clearly comfortable with taking other people’s ideas and running with them, yet doing so critically and using them to underpin your arguments.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There are many places where you make points but no examples or evidence is provided</i></li> <li>• <i>You develop a strong argument that draws on a range of examples and statistical evidence to back up your claims</i></li> <li>• <i><u>There are some points that could have been elaborated further, however.</u></i></li> <li>• <i><u>Some numerical data on animal experimentation could be added to indicate trends towards more or less use of animals</u></i></li> <li>• <i>...using the literature to demonstrate your understanding of opposing claims and counter-arguments</i></li> <li>• <i>Although you have a good number of sources, <u>you only scratched the surface of the issues they raise. For example, your discussion of the relationship between social democracy and welfare states is vague and underdeveloped.</u></i></li> <li>• <i>While you have consulted a good range of sources, <u>you tend to rely on one source more than others (Hulme &amp; Scott). You should try to incorporate the breadth of your sources more equally.</u></i></li> <li>• <i>This section could be developed further – at the moment it is very descriptive, <u>but could be made stronger and more critical, by linking this in with theories/concepts such as, for example, soft power or hegemony.</u></i></li> </ul>
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Can Writing Tutors provide feedback on adequate coverage of the sources and the level of detail students need to provide? ELE writing tutors ask questions for student to consider whereas discipline specialists can be more definitive about what is expected. It would seem that there are some areas, relating to the relative weight of different sources and views, depth, detail and coverage, where writing tutors cannot comment effectively.

**Table 3:** Strength/cohesion of argument

<b>ELE tutor feedback</b>	<b>Discipline specialist feedback</b>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You perhaps need to make your thesis statement (answer to the essay question) slightly clearer</i></li> <li>• <i>You do need a clear thesis statement</i></li> <li>• <i>From this introduction it is not obvious to me that you are going to address the question fully</i></li> <li>• <i>You need to make your thesis statement stronger – make it clear that this is your view</i></li> <li>• <i>I really like your thesis statement</i></li> <li>• <i>Does the essay question ask you to do this?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>You do make your position clear in the beginning which is good. It would be good to state why you are arguing your position. You also need to relate your points back to the argument, ensuring that they fit into the essay as a whole.</i></li> <li>• <i>The argument is very unclear and I am not convinced you have entirely understood the question. When you write your argument out be sure that you are speaking directly to the question, stating which side you are arguing and sticking to that throughout the question.</i></li> <li>• <i>The biggest weakness of the essay is that there was no real argument until the very last line.</i></li> <li>• <i>The introduction would also have benefitted from a statement of the main points you intended to explore in order to make the argument</i></li> </ul>
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In the category of Strength/cohesion of argument, it is clear that there is considerable crossover. This would suggest that Writing Tutors can usefully provide feedback.

As summed up in table 4 below, our findings suggest that in addition to providing feedback on categories 4 and 6, EAP writing tutors can, to some degree, meet student expectations for feedback on content by addressing issues in categories 2 and 3. Categories 1 and 5 clearly demarcate the limits of that ability.

**Table 4:** Areas of crossover feedback

<b>EAP Writing Tutor</b>	<b>Crossover</b>	<b>Discipline Specialist</b>
<b>4.</b> Structure and organisation <b>6.</b> Clarity of expression, presentation and referencing	<b>2.</b> Strength/cohesion of argument <b>3.</b> Use of sources/evidence	<b>1.</b> Critical/conceptual analysis <b>5.</b> Breadth and relevance of reading

## CONCLUSIONS

EAP tutors' engagement with content appears to relate closely to their beliefs and understanding of their role as teachers. The feedback comments ELE writing tutors made seem to demonstrate a high level of awareness, and beliefs and practice are closely related.

Although EAP tutors can comment on content to some extent, based on our findings, it would seem that the most effective way of ensuring useful feedback on both disciplinary *content* and *form*, as envisaged by Hyland (2013a), is for there to be a collaborative role for both the subject specialist and the language teacher. As Ingle (2016, p.158) has argued, they bring their particular experience and expertise together to focus on the content and thus achieve “a much closer focus on meaning”.

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